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The Origins of the "Regime of Goodness:" Remapping the Cultural History of Norway

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***The Origins of the "Regime of Goodness:" Remapping the Cultural History of Norway.* By Nina Witoszek.** Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2011. 231 pp. Price 319,- NOK. Softcover. ISBN: 978-8215017792.

Foreign media often depict Norway as a "modern utopia." The country is ranked highest in the United Nations Human Development Index, which measures the population's level of income, education and life expectancy. Norway possesses immense material wealth from its oil and natural gas revenues – a wealth that seems to be distributed relatively equally and a considerable part of which is put aside for future needs in the so-called Government Pension Fund. Moreover, compared to international standards, Norway uses an extraordinarily high amount of its GDP for development aid and is very active as a peace broker.

Norwegians themselves tend to explain these achievements by the combination of an abundance of natural resources, efficient management and sheer luck. In *The Origins of the "Regime of Goodness,"* however, Nina Witoszek, research director at the Centre for Development and the Environment at the University of Oslo, examines the cultural roots of "the Norwegian success story" (9). Witoszek, who emigrated from Poland in 1983, is currently one of the most sought-after commentators on Norwegian culture. Her book is an updated and slightly extended version of her earlier *Norske naturmytologier – fra Edda til økofilosofi*, previously published in Norwegian in 1998. The term "Regime of Goodness" used in the book's title was originally coined by historian Terje Tvedt. Tvedt used it critically to denote the prominent but unquestioned and self-affirming role of development aid, the advocacy of human rights, and peace brokering both in Norway's official foreign policy and in public awareness. Witoszek, however, uses the term in an exclusively favourable way and sees Norway indeed as "one of the world's most significant exporters of 'goodness' to all corners of the world" (7).

Witoszek adapts evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkin's concept of *memes*, understood as a cultural analogy to genes, to denote "images, stories, tunes and rituals which replicate and re-fashion themselves over several generations" (17). Her main thesis is that nature is the most important point of reference of such memes in Norway and that "there has been a remarkable consistency in the way the Norwegian nature memes legitimized projects which have advanced social justice, equality and cooperation" (20-21). In order to support her argument, Witoszek analyses a huge variety of sources, among them the famous folktales about Askeladden,¹ the writings of Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and Knut Hamsun (1859-1952), but also works of the painter Edvard Munch (1863-1944) and of the sculptor Gustav Vigeland (1869-1943).

Her most surprising finding is that in Norway, contrary to, for example, Germany, Romanticism with its transcendental idealization of nature, passion and the poetic genius was mostly rejected during the 19th century. Norwegian intellectuals had no need to turn back to nature, since they – living in a country that was hardly urbanized at all – did not feel estranged from it. The Lutheran priests in the country continued to successfully uphold Enlightenment ideals, notably moderation, equality and reason, as opposed to the Romantic transgression of limits. Even the Romantic poet Henrik Wergeland is, according to Witoszek, more remembered for his humanitarian commitment than for what was regarded as "the

¹Askeladden is a common character in many of the Norwegian folktales that were collected and published by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe in the 19th century. Askeladden usually seems to be lazy and incapable in the beginning but triumphs later on owing to his actual cleverness.

barbarous excesses of his poems” (42). Witoszek calls it “one of the meta-ironies of Romanticism that while nineteenth-century Europe was romancing the North as a Gothic utopia, the North was turning South and preaching the Classical ethos of Greece and Rome” (51). Nature became central for the development of a Norwegian national identity, but nevertheless a pragmatic, utilitarian perspective always dominated over the Romantic, idealising one. Witoszek finds expressions of these cultural values not least in Norwegian folktales. In the stories about Askeladden, she detects the ideals of “moderation and wise use of nature” as well as creativity, which makes Askeladden “a possible totemic ancestor of the sustainable world” (122). She admits that there are counterexamples, such as both Vigeland’s and Hamsun’s anti-humanistic, Romantic nature-worship with its totalitarian potential. These remained, however, an exception and could never spread out “in a culture which compulsively ideologises Nature and associates it with goodness” (165).

Witoszek’s portrayal of how Enlightenment ideals and what she calls “ecohumanism” both influenced and were promoted by prominent Norwegians such as writer Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910), polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930) and environmental philosopher Arne Næss (1912-2009) is both comprehensible and convincing. However, some deficiencies occur when she tries to detect such a tradition already in medieval (and, as she seems to suppose, pre-Christian) texts. The prologue of Snorri’s *Edda* is certainly less a testimony to an actual tradition of holistic earth-worship in Norway (an “indigenous, ‘ecological’ code,” 103) than an attempt at a Christian, euhemeristic explanation of the former existence of pagan religions (and it was moreover written in Iceland, not in Norway). Witoszek’s reading of the Eddic poem *Hávamál* (written down in the 13th century) as an expression of “a normative ideal which has been not only remarkably durable in Norwegian life and literature, but which shows a close affiliation with an ‘environmentally sound’ system of values” (101) is likewise not overly convincing. Many of the stanzas Witoszek refers to are generally considered to have been directly inspired by the *Disticha Catonis*, a collection of normative sayings that was in use all over medieval Europe. They can thus barely serve to explain Norwegian exceptionality, the more so as Witoszek does not bring in any sources from the long time span between the 13th and the 19th century that would demonstrate the existence of a living tradition based on the norms expressed in *Hávamál*.

Witoszek’s argumentation is much more persuasive when based on modern sources. Her markedly witty, often ironical style of writing moreover makes the book a very entertaining read. It can only be welcomed that her account of how the “regime of goodness” developed is now available in English and thus accessible to an international audience. However, the book requires some previous knowledge of Norwegian history and culture, and it is a pity that the publisher did not provide for better copy editing. There are numerous slips of the pen, which are at time humorous, such as the berserks being called “worriers” instead of “warriors” on page 93. Names are also quite frequently misspelled, for example “Skirnir” instead of “Skirnir,” on page 99; “Grettingasaga” instead of “Grettis saga,” on page 112; and “Jøstein Gaarder” instead of “Jostein Gaarder,” on page 193. Also, both an index and a bibliography would have been useful.

One of the questions Witoszek poses in the beginning is whether “the Norwegian regime of goodness really [is] the answer to human longing for security, peace and happiness” (9). This question remains, however, unanswered. The book ends rather abruptly, without any résumé, with the chapter on Arne Næss. This leaves room for a sequel in which the reality check signaled in the question quoted above could be conducted. After the terrorist attacks by right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik on 22 July 2011—a few months after

the publication of Witoszek's book—it is even more legitimate to ask whether Norway is indeed the modern utopia it is regarded to be from the outside.

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